

Secret Operations of World War II

Alexander Stillwell (Amber Books, 2018), 224 pp., bibliography, index.

Reviewed by David A. Foy

Students of World War II espionage and sabotage are familiar with the legendary exploits of such entities as America's OSS and Britain's SOE. As the brief new book by Alexander Stillwell points out, however, other nations involved in the global conflict had their own such organizations, no less heroic, though generally less heralded. The author attempts to fill this void with *Secret Operations of World War II*, subtitled *The Clandestine Battle Fought Across Occupied Countries by the SOE, OSS, Maquis, Partisans and Resistance Fighters*.

Stillwell begins his account with a discussion of British secret operations during the war, covering familiar ground with a survey of SOE, SIS, and Jedburgh teams, making the point that given the Nazi blitzkrieg that overran Europe and left Britain essentially on its own from 1939 to 1941, only by resorting to special operations could the United Kingdom affect the war on the continent in its early days. He also notes that US intervention following the Pearl Harbor attack allowed for more extensive special operations, especially in the pre- and post-D-Day period.

He then turns his attention to US secret operations, rehearsing well-known accounts to US intelligence officers and historians—the uneven cooperation between OSS and SOE, the new technology developed during the war (e.g., the Liberator pistol, the Joan-Eleanor communications system), the contributions of women in OSS, Allen Dulles and Operation Sunrise (which led to the early surrender of German forces in Italy), and a brief mention of the actions of Detachments 101 and 202 in the Far East.

As expected, Stillwell devotes a sizable part of his book to the French contribution to special operations during the war. He notes that the British were cooperating with French Resistance groups as early as 1941, the exploits of several of which he describes, such as Gilbert Renault (Col. Remy) and the 1,300-member Notre Dame Brotherhood, which provided the British with information to help locate the German battleship *Bismarck*. He discusses the Maquis, the young French men who joined

the Resistance, primarily to avoid the Service du Travail Obligatoire (German forced labor) and the despised Milice, the collaborationist French security service the Vichy Regime created with German support in January 1943. The author discusses the well-known and vicious Nazi reprisal in Oradour-sur-Glane following the Maquis kidnapping of a German Panzergrenadier officer. In retaliation, a German SS unit gathered the men of the town into barns, where they were all killed, and the women and children into the church, where they, too, were shot, and the barns and the church set ablaze. At the end of the carnage, 642 French citizens had been killed. In the aftermath of the Normandy invasion, the Forces Francaises de l'Interieur (French Forces of the Interior—FFI) were formed to bring order to the disparate French Resistance groups, which Stillwell characterizes as filled with undisciplined free spirits with blurred loyalties. Gen. Charles De Gaulle summarily declared that all Resistance leaders were now officially French Army soldiers, allowing him to claim that the French Army had continued to fight the Germans throughout the entire occupation. In summarizing the accomplishments of the French Resistance writ large, Stillwell makes the questionable assertion that their attacks deprived the Germans the use of 50 percent of the rail network in France.

In the subsequent chapters, readers are most likely to encounter new material on the subject of secret forces during World War II, lending the book a particular significance. During the course of the war, Belgium would serve a key role as a route to safety, first for soldiers escaping from Dunkirk and later for downed Allied airmen, such as the 400 who were returned to US and British control via the Comet Line. Stillwell highlights the thriving underground press in Belgium, the pre-D-Day sabotage activities of Groupe G, and the activities of L'Armee Secrete, the Secret Army formed shortly after the 1940 Belgian surrender to the Germans. In an interesting aside, Stillwell credits Belgian Minister of Justice-in-exile Victor de Laveleye with the inspiration for one of the most familiar images from the war, the “V-for-Victory” symbol,

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intended to serve as a visible reminder to the enemy of his inevitable defeat.

To the north, the Netherlands' ability to field 20 divisions was impressive but still outmatched by German forces, especially since the Dutch territory was occupied by the SS vice the Wehrmacht. Here Catholic, Jewish, and Protestant resistance groups sprang up, and readers encounter the familiar stories of the Frank family and Corrie Ten Boom's hiding of Jews and Resistance members. Stillwell also explains in detail the disaster that befell Dutch secret operations after a Dutch Resistance member was captured and attempted to warn London, a critical signal missed by the Dutch N Section at SOE, which continued to send multiple agents and supplies that immediately fell into German hands. The scope of the disaster was such that SIS began warning its operatives to stay away from their SOE rivals as a security measure. Stillwell concludes this chapter with an interesting discussion of the activity of Dutch Scouts during Operation Market Garden. The entire organization resisted integration into the Dutch equivalent of the Hitler Youth, the followers of British Scouts founder Lord Baden-Powell instead choosing to join the Resistance. One such member, Jan van Hoof, met US paratroopers in his scouting uniform and provided them the detailed notes and drawings he had made, showing German bridge defenses in the area. He reportedly was able to cut the wires to the Nijmegen Bridge that was about to be blown—only to be wounded in combat a short time later and then killed by the Germans.

Not long after the German invasion of Poland, the country was divided between Germany and the Soviet Union. Poland never officially surrendered, and an underground resistance movement formed immediately, though distance limited SOE support to the besieged country. Poles created a government-in-exile, first in France, then in London, and the Polish resistance movement was credited with saving more Jewish lives than any other Allied organization during the war. The cost of resistance was the highest in Poland—when the 100,000 occupants of the Warsaw Ghetto struck back at the German occupiers in 1944, 16,000 died in the fighting, and the Germans executed 200,000 more in reprisals.

Alarmed by the 1938 Anschluss between Germany and Austria, the Czechs constructed more than 10,000 pillboxes and blockhouses to fend off German attacks, but

they proved illusory defenses given the prevailing spirit of appeasement, which dissuaded their British and French allies from coming to their defense. This chapter alone makes the book worth reading, as it provides a detailed account of Operation Anthropoid, the Czech Resistance plot to assassinate SS-Obergruppenführer Reinhard Heydrich, a key figure in the development of the Holocaust. The account of Staff Sgt Jan Kubis and WO Joseph Gabcik is one of bravery mixed with jammed weapons and improvisation.

In contrast to the situation in Poland, the population of Denmark surrendered to the Germans shortly after the April 1940 invasion. Despite the fact that SOE dropped agents into Denmark as early as December 1942, the Germans took complete control of the Danish government by August of the following year. An interesting side story in this chapter is the Royal Air Force raid, suggested by the Danish Resistance, to destroy Gestapo records in a building at Aarhus University, reasoning that if the records were destroyed, the Gestapo would not know whom to arrest, enabling the Resistance to operate more effectively.

Thanks to a supply of critical natural resources and a determined Resistance movement that began immediately, the situation in Norway was arguably more critical than that in other European countries. The port city of Narvik had access to a sizable supply of iron ore, of strategic significance to the Allies and to Germany alike. The Germans were able to occupy the country before the Allies could act, and when the British did invade, they were rebuffed by German military might, which eventually reached 300,000 troops. A particularly critical target for the Norwegian Resistance was the Norsk Hydro Plant in Vemork, where the "heavy water" required for atomic development was produced. Several efforts were required, most notably Operation Gunnerside—the second such attempt—before production was brought to a halt and the critical stockpile destroyed.

In Italy, the September 1943 armistice with the Allies prompted the creation of a joint resistance effort by the National Liberation Committee. The Communist Garibaldi Brigades represented nearly 50 percent of the Resistance in Italy and worked with a variety of Allied entities, including SOE, the British Special Air Service, OSS, and British Directorate of Military Intelligence Section 9 (MI9), which provided support to the Resistance in

returning downed airmen to Britain, and US counterpart MIS-X. In July 1944, the Allied Central Commission organized a Patriots Branch to handle relations with the Resistance. When Allied armies ran into stiff resistance on the Gothic Line in northern Italy, they instructed Resistance members to stand down until the Allied advance could begin again, to the annoyance of Resistance members. In a book filled with examples of heroes who paid the ultimate price, readers will be especially drawn to the story of the Cerri family, whose seven sons were all shot by the Germans due to the father's resistance activities.

Stillwell characterizes resistance activities in the Balkans (Yugoslavia, Greece, Turkey, Romania) as "complex and often mutually antagonistic," a situation that proved challenging for the British and American elements attempting to work with them beginning in May 1943. In Yugoslavia, British authorities were impressed with the Communist Chetniks of Josep Broz, aka Tito, but he was suspicious of the British and kept them at arm's length. Compounding the situation was the Chetniks' fractious relationship with the other major resistance group, the Mihailovic Royalists. As Stillwell notes, the Chetniks proved more interested in using their Allied-supplied weapons against the royalists than the German occupiers.

Turning to the resistance network in the Soviet Union, Stillwell reminds readers of the size and impact of Operation Barbarossa, in which 4 million Axis troops and 600,000 vehicles swept across the Russian steppes. Although repeatedly warned, Stalin was in denial, and no one dared contradict him. However, after absorbing the initial shock, the Soviet High Command used partisan forces to disrupt German communications and supplies. Russian partisans, including the 53 divisions of NKVD troops under the command of Lavrenti Beria, worked together in support of Russian military operations.

Stillwell concludes his slim volume with a look at German secret operations during the war, noting that they were dispersed among the Wehrmacht, Luftwaffe, Kriegsmarine, and the SS. He notes the codebreaking

prowess of the Army High Command Chiffrierabteilung under William Fenner but concludes that the record for the Abwehr was "mixed," with few of its five departments as successful as their British and American counterparts. Stillwell notes in passing Operation Eiche (Otto Skorzeny's commando raid to free Mussolini from partisans), Operation Greif (in which Nazi troops masqueraded as US troops during the Battle of the Bulge), the failed Operation Pastorius (the Abwehr's attempt to infiltrate spies and saboteurs into wartime America), and the Duquesne Spy Ring (a group of 33 German spies arrested, convicted, and sentenced to a collective 300 years in prison in January 1942).

Several characteristics of *Secret Operations of World War II* recommend it to readers. Although the book is overly brief, encyclopedic in nature, and geared for a secondary school audience, it does discuss secret operations in second-tier European countries that seldom make it into more standard works, rendering it a useful reference work. The author, who has written four other books on special forces, is also to be commended for including previously-unknown photographs, liberally dispersed throughout the book, making it a treat for the eyes.

Readers should be aware, however, that this is a British-published book, written by an author from across the pond, which explains the list of primarily British works in the overly-brief bibliography (18 books, no other references). The sparse index is of limited value, and readers will find themselves encountering UK spellings ("tyre" for "tire") and referring to unabridged dictionaries to discover the meaning of such unfamiliar (to US audiences) terms as "cosh" (on page 39, a blackjack), "feluccas" (on page 41, a multi-masted Mediterranean sailing ship), and "gilets" (on page 83, waistcoats). The book ends abruptly, as does the text in each chapter, with limited-to-no introductions, conclusions, or transitions. Still, for readers who want to know more about such topics as the multi-national Balkan Air Force that flew 15 different types of planes to support Yugoslav and Italian partisans during the war, this is a useful volume.



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